

Lawmakers seek ideas on school funding

Senate panel hosts Vancouver meeting, the first in a series

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In an effort to resolve one of the state's most pressing problems, Washington lawmakers listened Wednesday night in Vancouver as superintendents, teachers, parents and concerned citizens shared their thoughts on how to adequately fund the state's public school system.

One parent, Brooke Valentine, with the Washington State Parent Teacher Association, told lawmakers: No matter the zip code a student lives in, they deserve equitable access to highly qualified teachers, a highly qualified principal and resources.

The Washington State Supreme Court agrees.

The state's top court told legislators to end the practice of relying too much on local tax levies, a practice that has resulted in an unequal level of funding between school districts.

In their 2012 McCleary decision, the state's justices ruled that the state failed to meet its constitutional duty to adequately fund the state's public schools.

This legislative session, lawmakers approved an increase in education funding of \$1.3 billion, which will help to shrink class sizes in lower grades and pay for all-day kindergarten. But the court criticized the progress, slapping the state Legislature with a \$100,000-a-day fine for continuing to fail to meet its constitutional duty of funding public schools.

Key lawmakers who sit on the Senate's early learning and K-12 education committees are hosting a series of meetings throughout the state to gather input and also share the details of current proposals. They kicked off the series in Vancouver at Educational Service District 112 on Wednesday.

Steven Webb, superintendent of Vancouver Public Schools, asked the panel of lawmakers a rhetorical question.

"Should the structure of local levies be changed?" Webb said, answering himself with a "yes, yes, yes."

Many who testified said local levy dollars should be used to supplement education funding and pay for enrichment programs, not help pay for basic-education needs such as teacher salaries.

But Rob Lutz, a teacher in Evergreen Public Schools, said the real issue is not how local levy dollars are being spent, but the fact that the state is not fully funding basic education.

"Ultimately, if you fully fund education, reliance on local levies won't be necessary," he told the panel.

The proposals on how to reduce reliance on local levies vary. The key proposal under consideration, Senate Bill 6130, creates a statewide teacher salary. It would prohibit using local levy dollars for basic education, which would need to be clearly defined, but would include teacher salaries.

The proposal, however, also calls for a new revenue source, but doesn't wade into the politically contentious issue of where the money would come from.

Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center, said the discussion was a starting point. Lawmakers are scheduled to meet six more times at different education service districts across the state.

Gov. Jay Inslee also has spearheaded a McCleary workgroup with members from all four caucuses of the Legislature.

In a letter earlier this month, he said if the workgroup can find consensus by Nov. 19, he would call a special session to pass an education reform measure.

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